

The Dignity of Work: An Anthropological Examination

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When a new social encyclical is published, it is presented, particularly by television and newspapers, as if it were the latest novel by a famous author, with a great emphasis on novelty. This emphasis responds to the newsworthiness criteria of the contemporary media, and in itself is not wrong, but it tends to conceal the fact that the Catholic Social Teaching (CST) is a body in continuous development. Within this body, each document dialogues with its predecessors and cannot be understood outside this context. This is a point of great importance, so much so that Pope Francis feels the need to emphasise it when, in no. 15 of the encyclical *Laudato si'*, he states: “this Encyclical Letter [...] is now added to the body of the Church's social teaching”.

The poignancy of the term ‘body’ should be emphasised, as it gives the idea of the deep organic bond that binds the documents that are part of it: for the most recent texts, the earlier ones are not simply a footnote reference, but a source of inspiration. The insights and statements of the past are continually taken up in the light of new circumstances, in a dynamism of reflection that constantly deepens and enriches them. This is how CST grows and develops.

The pastoral constitution *Gaudium et spes* (GS) of Vatican II is a part of this body, as the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* makes clear in n. 96. Within the limits of the time available here, we will now try to see how concretely some documents of the post-Council social magisterium welcome and relaunch the inspiration found in GS. We will do this by focusing in particular on one of the themes at the heart of social doctrine from its origins, namely work.

1. A new framework for Catholic Social Teaching

However, it is good to start with a broader view. Some of the steps taken by GS, in fact, are not only a source of inspiration for subsequent stances on specific issues, but redefine the overall framework and the basic attitudes of CST.

a) A world in constant change

Let us focus on some of the opening paragraphs of the GS.

Today, the human race is involved in a new stage of history. Profound and rapid changes are spreading by degrees around the whole world. Triggered by the intelligence and creative energies of man, these changes recoil upon him, upon his decisions and desires, both individual and collective, and upon his manner of thinking and acting with respect to things and to people. Hence we can already speak of a true cultural and social transformation, one which has repercussions on man's religious life as well (GS 4).

The starting point is therefore the awareness of change in society and culture, of an increasingly rapid change. This awareness will become one of the cornerstones of CST, moving from being recognised as a fact to being considered a structural element of human life. Not only does the world change, but above all it never stops changing, and at an increasing speed. As *Laudato Si'* states

The continued acceleration of changes affecting humanity and the planet is coupled today with a more intensified pace of life and work which might be called 'rapidification'. Although change is part of the working of complex systems, the speed with which human activity has developed contrasts with the naturally slow pace of biological evolution. Moreover, the goals of this rapid and constant change are not necessarily geared to the common good or to integral and sustainable human development. Change is something desirable, yet it becomes a source of anxiety when it causes harm to the world and to the quality of life of much of humanity (LS 18).

b) A world which is plural and diverse

The second characteristic of the world that GS highlights from the outset is that it is diverse, it is plural:

there is a growing exchange of ideas, but the very words by which key concepts are expressed take on quite different meanings in different ideological systems (GS 4).

Finally, these new conditions have their impact on religion. On the one hand a more critical ability to distinguish religion from a magical view of the world and from the superstitions which still circulate purifies it and exacts day by day a more personal and explicit adherence to faith. As a result many persons are achieving a more vivid sense of God. On the other hand, growing numbers of people are abandoning religion in practice. Unlike former days, the denial of God or of religion, or the abandonment of them, are no longer unusual and individual occurrences (GS 7).

The same word has different meanings in different places and groups. And, in the same circumstances, some have a deeper and more authentic experience of God, while others abandon religion.

The idea that the world is plural is also part of the legacy of Vatican II that the subsequent magisterium continues to deepen and develop. Today this pluralism is recognised as a richness that responds to a precise design of God:

Freedom is a right of every person: each individual enjoys the freedom of belief, thought, expression and action. The pluralism and the diversity of religions, colour, sex, race and language are willed by God in His wisdom, through which He created human beings. This divine wisdom is the source from which the right to freedom of belief and the freedom to be different derives. Therefore, the fact that people are forced to adhere to a certain religion or culture must be rejected, as too the imposition of a cultural way of life that others do not accept¹.

¹ *Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together*, Abu Dhabi, 4 February 2019, www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/travels/2019/outside/documents/papa-francesco_20190204_documento-fratellanza-umana.html

The ongoing reflection of believers has discovered that pluralism and diversity are not simply a matter of fact, but have a theological relevance, as they are an element of God's plan.

In parallel, the awareness has grown that the Church, spread all over the world, is also plural. This is in fact a legacy of the lived experience of the Council, which gathered bishops from all corners of the world for the first time. Thus, a few years later, Paul VI could state:

In the face of such widely varying situations it is difficult for us to utter a unified message and to put forward a solution which has universal validity. Such is not our ambition, nor is it our mission. It is up to the Christian communities to analyse with objectivity the situation which is proper to their own country, to shed on it the light of the Gospel's unalterable words and to draw principles of reflection, norms of judgment and directives for action from the social teaching of the Church. [...] It is up to these Christian communities, with the help of the Holy Spirit, in communion with the bishops who hold responsibility and in dialogue with other Christian brethren and all men of goodwill, to discern the options and commitments which are called for in order to bring about the social, political and economic changes seen in many cases to be urgently needed (OA 4).

Pluralism in the Church is also one of the strongest experiences that the Synod on Synodality currently underway allows for, and the management of this diversity is one of its key concerns.

c) The human being is the way for the Church

According to GS, the Church's aim is to 'bring to mankind light kindled from the Gospel, and put at its disposal those saving resources which the Church herself, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, receives from her Founder' (GS 3). To achieve this, the Church needs to engage with humankind in conversation. What does it mean to address one's word to a world which is diverse and constantly changing?

Firstly, it means that reference to the past can no longer be considered normative. As GS states, 'The institutions, laws and modes of thinking and feeling as handed down from previous generations do not always seem to be well adapted to the contemporary state of affairs' (GS 7). Secondly, that the reference to divine authority no longer works either, as it is not recognised by all. Dialogue with humanity must therefore take place on a different basis. What has been called the 'anthropological turn' brought about by the Council is rooted here: the basis of dialogue can only be what all men and women share, that is, the human condition, the fact of being human: 'Hence the focal point of our total presentation will be man himself, whole and entire, body and soul, heart and conscience, mind and will' (GS 3).

All the subsequent magisterium up to today will remain faithful to this choice made by the Council, indeed, will continue to develop it. Limiting ourselves to one example, we can think of John Paul II's first encyclical, *Redemptor hominis* (1979), which states

The Church cannot abandon man, for his 'destiny', that is to say his election, calling, birth and death, salvation or perdition, is so closely and unbreakably linked with Christ. We are speaking precisely of each man on this planet [...]. Man in the full truth of his existence, of his personal being and also of his community and social being-in the sphere of his own family, in the sphere of society and very diverse contexts, in the sphere of his own nation or people (perhaps still only that of his clan or tribe), and in the sphere of the whole of mankind- this man is the primary route that the Church must travel in fulfilling her mission: he is the primary and fundamental way for the Church, the way traced out by Christ himself, the way that leads invariably through the mystery of the Incarnation and the Redemption (RH 14).

Again, we see that the Council's stance has been broadened and deepened. Above all, its theological roots have been unveiled.

d) A different attitude

But let's take some time to discover how this new framework concretely operates. We will do so by taking two texts from CST, one written well before

GS, and the other one after. The first is one of the opening paragraphs of *Rerum Novarum*.

In any case we clearly see, and on this there is general agreement, that some opportune remedy must be found quickly for the misery and wretchedness pressing so unjustly on the majority of the working class: for the ancient workingmen's guilds were abolished in the last century, and no other protective organisation took their place. Public institutions and the laws set aside the ancient religion. Hence, by degrees it has come to pass that working men have been surrendered, isolated and helpless, to the hardheartedness of employers and the greed of unchecked competition. The mischief has been increased by rapacious usury, which, although more than once condemned by the Church, is nevertheless, under a different guise, but with like injustice, still practiced by covetous and grasping men. To this must be added that the hiring of labour and the conduct of trade are concentrated in the hands of comparatively few; so that a small number of very rich men have been able to lay upon the teeming masses of the labouring poor a yoke little better than that of slavery itself (RN 3).

As far as the content is concerned, this paragraph expresses compassion for the fate of the poor and denounces the injustice of their condition. This has been more or less the standard of CST from the beginning. For us, it is more interesting to focus on the words that express, so to speak, the Church's basic attitude towards this situation. It is recalled that the Church condemns certain practices, but this means placing itself in a position of superiority, assuming a judgmental attitude that, in an increasingly plural world, is immediately rejected. Faced with this attitude in our day, the automatic reaction is: 'Who made you a judge?'. The other attitude is a kind of regret: the evils of the present are the consequence of having moved away from an earlier set up which was better. The answer to the quest for justice lies in the past, to which we must return. The way forward is a 'sound restoration' (QA 15), to use one of the key words of the encyclical *Quadragesimo anno* (1931). But this is not a very fruitful attitude in a world which is continually changing.

Now we move exactly one century forward, and come to John Paul II's *Centesimus annus*. We read there:

It would appear that, on the level of individual nations and of international relations, the *free market* is the most efficient instrument for utilising resources and effectively responding to needs. But this is true only for those needs which are 'solvent', insofar as they are endowed with purchasing power, and for those resources which are 'marketable', insofar as they are capable of obtaining a satisfactory price. But there are many human needs which find no place on the market. It is a strict duty of justice and truth not to allow fundamental human needs to remain unsatisfied, and not to allow those burdened by such needs to perish. It is also necessary to help these needy people to acquire expertise, to enter the circle of exchange, and to develop their skills in order to make the best use of their capacities and resources. Even prior to the logic of a fair exchange of goods and the forms of justice appropriate to it, there exists *something which is due to man because he is man*, by reason of his lofty dignity. Inseparable from that required 'something' is the possibility to survive and, at the same time, to make an active contribution to the common good of humanity (CA 34).

The content is essentially the same: compassion and denunciation of injustice. The attitude, however, is very different and this change is the result of the new framework brought about by Vatican II: there is denunciation of injustice but no mention of condemnation, just as there is no reference to a past to return to. But let us focus above all on the last lines, which offer us what is to be considered a definition of justice, indeed of a more fundamental justice than the traditional framework of commutative justice. Well, this definition does not refer to norms, or to a social order of the past, not even to God's will: the measure of this justice is the human being and his dignity. Here John Paul II is walking the Council's talk, or rather he is pushing the Council's anthropological turn to its limit.

2. Work as *actus personae*

The paragraph from *Centesimus annus* that we have just read also offers us an easy transition to the topic of work. It is through work that people ordinarily earn their living, and it is through work that they contribute to the common good of humanity. This explains why work has been one of the central issues of social doctrine since its origins. As John Paul II states at the beginning of the encyclical *Laborem exercens* (1981)

human work is *a key*, probably *the essential key*, to the whole social question, if we try to see that question really from the point of view of man's good. And if the solution - or rather the gradual solution - of the social question, which keeps coming up and becomes ever more complex, must be sought in the direction of 'making life more human', then the key, namely human work, acquires fundamental and decisive importance (LE 3).

It is work that fulfils and protects human dignity, that transforms it from an abstract concept to a lived experience. 'Work means dignity' is a phrase that sums up Pope Francis' magisterium on this issue, and which he himself uttered during his pastoral visit to Cagliari (22 September 2013). The path to social justice passes through ensuring that every person has work, and not any kind of work, but decent work.

It is therefore not surprising that since the Council, CST has built a true humanism of work. The constitution *Gaudium et spes* itself takes the first steps in this direction:

By his labor a man ordinarily supports himself and his family, is joined to his fellow men and serves them, and can exercise genuine charity and be a partner in the work of bringing divine creation to perfection. Indeed, we hold that through labour offered to God man is associated with the redemptive work of Jesus Christ, Who conferred an eminent dignity on labour when at Nazareth He worked with His own hands. From this there follows for every man the duty of working faithfully and also the right to work. It is the duty of society, moreover, according to the circumstances prevailing in it,

and in keeping with its role, to help the citizens to find sufficient employment. Finally, remuneration for labour is to be such that man may be furnished the means to cultivate worthily his own material, social, cultural, and spiritual life and that of his dependents, in view of the function and productiveness of each one, the conditions of the factory or workshop, and the common good.

This humanism is authentically integral, as it includes the development of a true spirituality of work and indeed a theology of work. In the very first page of the book of *Genesis*, God is introduced as someone who works, and rests on the seventh day. Creation is God's work, and not only at the beginning: God works every day to sustain and protect the life of all creatures, as we can read in many passages, e.g. *Psalms* 104. In other words, we can say that work is what God does when He takes care of His creation.

Laborem exercens invites us to go further and deeper, and experience the Christological meaning of work. Actually, work is not only God's plan for women and men, but the option He made for Himself. When He became a man, the Son of God spent most of His life working as a craftsman: 'the eloquence of the life of Christ is unequivocal: he belongs to the "working world", he has appreciation and respect for human work' (LE 26). This tells us that work has a specific place in the plan of salvation, which is the accomplishment of God's caring love for men and women and the whole of creation. For Jesus' disciples, work is a way to walk in His footsteps: 'Sweat and toil, which work necessarily involves in the present condition of the human race, present the Christian and everyone who is called to follow Christ with the possibility of sharing lovingly in the work that Christ came to do' (LE 27).

We encounter one of the peaks of the development of this humanism of work in the opening paragraphs of *Laborem exercens*, where John Paul II proposes the distinction between the objective and subjective sense of work. As the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church explains, 'In the *objective sense*, [work] is the sum of activities, resources, instruments and technologies used by men and women to produce things. [...] *Work in the objective sense constitutes the contingent aspect of human activity*, which constantly varies in its

expressions according to the changing technological, cultural, social and political conditions' (no. 270).

In the subjective sense, on the other hand, work refers to the fact that as the 'image of God' [man] is a person, that is to say, a subjective being capable of acting in a planned and rational way, capable of deciding about himself, and with a tendency to self-realisation. As *a person, man is therefore the subject of work*. As a person he works, he performs various actions belonging to the work process; independently of their objective content, these actions must all serve to realise his humanity, to fulfil the calling to be a person that is his by reason of his very humanity (LE 6).

In other words, 'work in its subjective aspect is always a personal action, an *actus personae*' (LE 24). This distinction between the objective and subjective sense of work has clear and deep consequences:

the primary basis of the value of work is man himself, who is its subject. This leads immediately to a very important conclusion of an ethical nature: however true it may be that man is destined for work and called to it, in the first place work is 'for man' and not man 'for work'. Through this conclusion one rightly comes to recognise the pre-eminence of the subjective meaning of work over the objective one. Given this way of understanding things, and presupposing that different sorts of work that people do can have greater or lesser objective value, let us try nevertheless to show that each sort is judged above all by *the measure of the dignity* of the subject of work, that is to say the person, *the individual who carries it out* (LE 6).

In the encyclical *Fratelli tutti*, Pope Francis again takes up and develops this humanism of work by emphasising its social dimension when he states:

In a genuinely developed society, work is an essential dimension of social life, for it is not only a means of earning one's daily bread, but also of personal growth, the building of healthy relationships, self-expression and the exchange of gifts. Work gives us a sense of

shared responsibility for the development of the world, and ultimately, for our life as a people (FT 162).

3. A relational notion of work

The progressive development of Christian anthropology over the last sixty years has increasingly emphasised the relational nature of the person and thus the importance of relations. Pope Benedict XVI emphasizes this in *Caritas in veritate*:

As a spiritual being, the human creature is defined through interpersonal relations. The more authentically he or she lives these relations, the more his or her own personal identity matures. It is not by isolation that man establishes his worth, but by placing himself in relation with others and with God. Hence these relations take on fundamental importance (CA 53).

In his *Video Message on the occasion of the 109th Session of the International Labour Conference*, Pope Francis draws the consequences of this anthropological approach to work, proposing a relational notion of it:

if work is a relationship, then it must include the dimension of care, because no relationship can survive without care. Here we are not just referring to the work of assistance: the pandemic reminds us of its fundamental importance, which perhaps we have overlooked. Care goes further; it must be a dimension of all work. Work that does not take care, that destroys Creation, that endangers the survival of future generations, does not respect the dignity of workers and cannot be considered decent. On the contrary, work that cares, that contributes to the restoration of full human dignity, will help to ensure a sustainable future for future generations.² And this dimension of care involves, first and foremost, the workers. In other words, a question we can ask ourselves in our daily lives: how does a business, for example, take care of its workers?

² Cf. *Care is work, work is care*, Report of ‘The Future of Work - Labour after *Laudato si’*’ Project, <https://futureofwork-labourafterlaudatosi.net/> (appearing as footnote no. 4 in the original text).

This link between work and care is a bridge between the tradition of CST and the new developments represented by *Laudato Si'*, which is dedicated precisely to the care for our common home. Therefore, it represents the frontier of reflection, but above all of the commitment of the Church, its organisations and individual Christians to ensure that work becomes more and more a human and humanising experience for all those who perform it. For many of them, the first step is to make it more humane or at least less inhuman.